

## **Empowering or Force-feeding?: Raising controversial issues in the Japanese EFL classroom**

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For a variety of reasons, many English language teachers tend to shy away from introducing issues that might cause any sort of disagreement of opinion or disconcertion on the part of their students. Although in reality this belief may be unfounded, it seems to be prevalent, especially in a society that values similitude in order to create a sense of harmony. In this article I discuss my experiences in raising controversial issues in the EFL classroom in Japan, and what the responses of the students has been.

You probably have heard the story about the starfish on the beach, about the big storm that had happened the night before, with the big waves that had washed hundreds of little starfish onto the beach. Well, as you know, starfish can't live very long out of the water because they'll dry up and die. This morning, a young woman was taking her usual stroll when she noticed an older woman down the beach who was picking up the starfish and tossing them back into the water. "Good morning. Quite a storm, wasn't it?" said the younger woman.

The older woman continued to throw the starfish, saying, "Yeah, sure was."

The younger woman asked, "You know, there are so many of these starfish. There must be thousands. What you're doing couldn't possibly make that much difference. Why are you doing this?" The young woman just could not understand why the older woman would be doing such a thing.

Often times we don't understand why someone would do something. It seems so strange, or dangerous, or inappropriate under the circumstances.

You might also have heard of Milton Erickson, the brilliant psychologist. When Milton was a little boy growing up on a farm, he was very observant, watching the plants as they grew, watching the animals as they were born and lived their lives, watching the seasons change. One day, he and his father were out in the field, and it was getting on toward late afternoon, about time to get the cows into the barn so they could milk them before going to bed. They managed to get all the cows in the barn except one. She was so stubborn, and no matter how hard the father pulled, she wouldn't budge.

Milton was just around 10 years old. He stood watching his father, watching the cow, and taking this all in. And he said to his father, "Dad, I think I can get the cow into the barn."

The father laughed and said, "No, Milton, I don't think you can. You see, this is a very big cow and you're just a little boy."

"But I think I can, Dad. Dad, if I get the cow into the barn, will you give me a dollar?" His father, of course, knew there was no way his son could manage to get that stubborn cow into the barn, so he agreed to the bet and walked back into the house to get ready for dinner. A little while later, Milton came into the kitchen saying, "Dad, the cow's in the barn. Can I have my dollar now?" The father, disbelieving is son, went out to the barn, opened the door, and, sure enough, standing there was the stubborn cow.

"Milton, I don't understand. How did you get her into the barn?"

"Gee, Dad, it was easy."

Some things really are quite easy, but we make them more complicated than they need to be.

I have been teaching EFL for 23 years, both here in Japan and in Barcelona, Spain. Like many other teachers, in my early days of teaching I received hands-on teacher training by reading the teacher's guides that accompanied the mainstream course books I was given to use. This built my confidence, and later I was able to use the structures of many activities and adapt them to topics that the students chose.

Around 1994 I became interested in teaching about HIV and AIDS, and in 1995 I founded JAPANetwork, an organization of teachers who are interested in approaching the topic in the English language classroom. The challenge has been how to present a topic that can cause embarrassment on the part of the teacher and of the students.

The first time I approached the topic of AIDS in a classroom of teenagers, I had all these thoughts going around in my mind: "What will the students' reactions be? Will they complain to the other staff? Will they tell their parents? Will I lose my job? Will they laugh and scoff at the topic? Will they be too embarrassed and not say anything the whole class? What will I do then?" Well, the first class amazed me. They were quite mature about it, discussed the questions they felt comfortable talking about, and at the end of class they told me that they would like to learn more about AIDS. The frequency of my own self-doubting questions has decreased. Over the years, I've seen genuine student interest in a topic that has motivated many of them to stay after class to keep talking about it and to ask more questions.

Two years ago I developed a 12-week course for a reading seminar on the topic of HIV/AIDS which covered related issues such as war and conflicts, the status of women, sexuality and gender, culture and values, economics, politics, and the trafficking of women and children around the world. I have also taught courses in Media Literacy, U.S. Culture, and a short 6-week unit on the protest music of the Vietnam and Iraq wars (which is part of my current research).

### **Some teachers' views**

In my graduate research on teachers' attitudes toward teaching controversial issues, responses included several arguments against teaching controversial issues: "I am NOT interested in using language teaching as a pulpit for social action." My response to that is... is teaching history, philosophy, science, literature or any subject "a pulpit for social action?" Not necessarily. It's all in how it is presented and what students choose to do with it.

Four respondents commented, "It depends on whether students select the topic - it's their choice." That's all well and good, but if you think that a topic has nothing to do with you, you probably will not raise it. (This is similar to the current AIDS situation. If a person does not see herself as being at risk for HIV based on limited information or incorrect stereotypes, she will probably not seek out information about testing.)

"Students in my writing classes and conversation classes have plenty of opportunity to bring up any topic they wish. I tend to go with that rather than push my topics off on them." My topics? Not OUR topics? As though issues such as helping the homeless, creating peace, or preventing environmental damage do not impact our lives in some way every day?

And my favorite, "I don't want to make any statement." In raising the issues, you make a statement, just as when you don't. Cates writes:

While this omission may seem harmless, some educators are concerned about the message this sends to students. Eisner (cited in Totten, 1986), for example, argues: 'It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider; the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives with which one can view a situation or problem. (p. 8)'

Also:

Omitting important but controversial issues from our language teaching means that, instead of empowering our language students with an understanding of complex world problems and what can be done to solve them, we are subtly teaching them that language study is irrelevant to the world and the controversial problems facing it. (1997)

"Why not stick to the textbook?" Often, teachers will use the argument that teachers should follow the procedures and content of course books since they have been developed by trained, knowledgeable specialists. Those teachers are missing the essence of what it means to be a teacher. Consider this definition from *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching* by David Hansen (2001):

...teaching entails a moral, not just academic, relation between teacher and student. That relation surfaces in how teachers treat both subject matter and students. The teacher's curricular choices presume a value or normative judgment-"This is worth studying, that is not (at least not now)" (p. 10).

Hansen argues that teaching cannot be replaced with "anonymous supplier on one side of the transom passing information over to anonymous customer on the other side." Teaching involves delicate intricacies on the teacher's part of balancing subject matter, student response and interest.

In their article from JALT 2004 conference proceedings, Brady, et. al. cite Splitter who stated that

schools and teachers must offer students a realistic way to deal with the larger questions of life such as who am I as an individual and as a social being; does (my) life have a purpose; what does it mean to live well; and what kind of world do I/we want to live in? (p. 81).

And in *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes about the issue of care in the classroom:

Well-learned distinctions between public and private make us believe that love has no place in the classroom.... Professors are expected to publish, but no one really expects or demands of us that we really care about teaching in uniquely passionate and different ways (p. 198).

When raising social issues, teachers desire to use the language that students are learning in order to raise students' awareness of the problems and, hopefully, to develop a sense of compassion or understanding in their students.

One benefit for the teacher who sticks to the course book is that there is a rather clearly defined criteria by which to judge the students' progress. When a teacher deals with the issue of refugees or rising sea levels affecting island nations with the purpose of consciousness-raising, the criteria for student success takes on another dimension, one that cannot easily be tested. Because the teacher cannot be sure that the student has been moved in any way by the content, at the end of the class or the course, she may be left with a sense of "was it worth all the effort?"

This feeling, repeated over the years, can lead to burn-out. If we do not see positive outcomes in the work we do, the natural thing to do is to question the purpose and effectiveness of our teaching. Yet once in a while, a student will come to you and say, "Do you have time at lunch? I want to talk to you about XYZ that you taught us about last week. You see, my teacher in another course was talking about the same thing, and I understood because I remembered it in your class!" Comments like these reaffirm your belief that there is a higher result-beyond language education-for your effort.

Testing for language is one thing, but testing for development as human beings is quite another. As has been shown above, some may argue that a language teacher's job is to stick to the coursebook rather than walk students through the vagueries of issues that cannot—or should not?—be solved from the desks in a classroom. I believe the teacher's job includes both, but as

teachers we need to be able to step back and allow the students to find out for themselves, to develop at their own pace. It's like being a referee dropping a question on the playing field and letting the students kick it around.

This, in turn, allows students the freedom to come up with their own thoughts about the topics, and from student feedback I've learned that this is a rare experience in many schools in Japan. The teacher doesn't have the answers (reflecting real life). The students paint the picture together. The students create the music through a jam session with everyone putting in her own bit.

Teaching is about opening doors to new knowledge and exposure to new ideas. If language teaching does not offer an opportunity to explore those ideas and opinions, what is the value of learning that language? So, if I raise the topic of HIV/AIDS, or child labor, the increasing gap between rich and poor, I am making a statement to my students that 1) yes, this is a topic that is important, 2) it is safe to talk about it here, and 3) it is somehow related to our lives.

In the case of HIV/AIDS, noting rising infection rates among Japanese youth is one step. Actually giving them phrases that they can use with a partner to negotiate safe sex or not having sex puts them in better control of their lives. The third, and most important step, changing behavior, is up to them. And I tell them that, too.

### **So, the WHY is...**

- to expand students' knowledge and views of the world and of themselves and their place in Japanese society
- in order for students to reflect on their own situation and their relationship to the topic / information
- caring that students develop a sense of awareness of and, hopefully, compassion for those directly affected by the topics
- caring that students enhance self-esteem

### **The HOW is...**

As much as possible, relate the issue to something in the students' lives. Nancy Graves hit the nail on the head when she summarized the feelings of many students: "If it's about us, we'll listen. If it's not, we won't" (Graves 2008). When you are thinking about creating teaching materials, think about what is important to your students. If you'd like them to think about the importance of using water carefully, ask them what they would do if they didn't have water (and show them "Water Conservation PSA" on YouTube). Help the students by providing questions to stimulate their thinking:

- What experiences have students had that they can relate to the material? eg. after school jobs and their rights as part-time workers.
- What kinds of commercials do they see on TV? Do the commercials really give them the information they need in order to make an informed purchasing decision, or do the commercials offer promises of popularity, riches, and the fragrant (albeit chemical) aroma of McDonald's? How does eating beef relate to global climate changes? Is that in the commercial?
- Why should I choose to buy potatoes grown in Aichi rather than potatoes that are grown in Hokkaido?

Hansen (2001) suggests, and I would agree, that "students may learn as much from a teacher's conduct as from the subject matter he or she teaches" (p. 17). If the teacher acts in a mature manner about a topic, chances are that the students will respond that way as well, if we

give them that chance. With a topic such as HIV/AIDS, if the teacher handles vocabulary that students might find embarrassing, but allows them the choice of whether or not to use it in discussions, it can reduce resistance or embarrassment for the students. This does not mean that we should always make sure the content does not evoke emotions.

### **Teach-Ins**

If we believe that the teacher does not have all the answers, then where possible, we must encourage inclusion of student-generated material rather than simply sticking to the exercises in the text or the topics that we want the students to know about. At least once a semester I include one class that I call Teach-Ins. In that class, each student is responsible for 15 minutes of the class: 5 minutes of presentation on a topic they find important, and 10 minutes of discussion. I have found that when students are given the chance to raise their own issues after experiencing some sample classes, the topics they address are issues that raise fundamental questions about human rights, responsibility for the environment, and so on. Moreover, they present them in very mature ways.

In my conversation classes, I do continual assessment along with short homework sheets and vocabulary quizzes for each topic. Participation through giving opinions, asking questions, and making comments in English is a large part of their grade. The Teach-In allows me extra time to do additional assessment.

One important point to note, however, is that classroom discussion of social issues offers the student(s) the choice of standing back from the problem or taking a position from within it. A discussion about whether men in Japan should be paid the same as women for doing the same work, for example, or who is responsible for changing the status quo can involve the students personally or from a detached standpoint. They delve into the problem to the extent they feel comfortable.

Which brings us back to M.E. and the cow. So Milton's father goes back into the house to get ready for dinner, thinking Milton will not be able to move that stubborn old cow. And pretty soon, Milton comes in the back door and says, "Dad, the cow's in the barn. Can I have my dollar now?"

Milton's father doesn't believe it's possible, but after they go out to the barn and find the cow there, he asks Milton how he was able to accomplish it.

"It was easy. I just pulled on her tail and she moved forward. I kept pulling and she moved forward, all the way into the barn."

### **Asking questions and step back**

I have been studying ballroom dance for several years now. I wrote a piece for the GALE newsletter about what I observed about teaching from learning to dance the Tango (Haynes, 2006). And if I can use that metaphor here, I would say that in the Tango or Waltz or many other dances, one partner often leads the other partner. There are certain signals you give to your partner, the way you hold your hand, the way you move your body, that invite your partner to move in a certain way. So in class, I like to ask questions that lead students' thinking. But the metaphor stops there because after that, the students decide the next step. They share their own opinions with each other. They dance with each other from that point.

When developing teaching materials, I attempt to follow these guidelines:

- Give student a wide space (dance floor) to discuss the topic. What they choose to do with the topics is up to them.

- Give students time to consider what they think about the topic before they enter the class through short homework assignments, which also helps them with unfamiliar vocabulary before class.

- Give gentle prodding rather than in-your-face. Stay out of it. I rarely give my opinion on a matter, but rather ask the students to consider another viewpoint (often, one that I do not agree with!).

- Seizing the moment: in a recent reading class the chapter was about "Falling in love", with no hint that romantic relationships are not limited to two people of opposite genders. Ask what's missing here?

- Think about it in a different way: Was slavery good or bad? From whose perspective? What brought about the end to slavery?

- Ask students to find exceptions to what is in the textbook or handouts: "Has there ever been a time when it was not this way?" or "Has there been a similar problem in the past that was solved? How was it solved? What can we learn from that earlier problem?"

- Asking for alternatives: "What do we do about this? How do we create the world we want to live in?"

- Give students the space and time to imagine machines, systems, policies that would create the world that they envision.

### **Some students' views**

I normally collect student feedback each time I teach the topic of HIV/AIDS, and the response has been overwhelmingly a positive one. I have been quite impressed with many students' depth of reflection about the problem and the changes in their attitudes as a result of their study of the issue:

"Why is a foreigner doing this?" (when we should be doing it ourselves)

"Men, we are the customers for them. Then if we don't buy them, the industry will lost their income and they will not take women and children. Though this is not actual way, because Japanese men's society tends to recognize having sex as adult behavior. Break this custom, or sex industry will not increase\*." (male, 2nd-year student)

"Before I learned about it, I didn't mind if my partner didn't use condoms but from now on, I will use it for sure." (female, 2nd-year student)

"I learned the difference between HIV and AIDS. Although I've learned about HIV/AIDS in junior high and high school, it was the first time to learn so specifically. I've never learned where HIV is found [in the body], how to protect yourself form infection, how alcohol affects us etc before.... I felt as if it were my own affair. I also have to be aware of it." (male, 2nd-year student)

"Because I studied HIV in your class, I talked to my boyfriend and we decided we are going to use condoms from now on." (female, 2nd-year student)

Comments I have received on studying other issues have been equally as thoughtful:

Children around the world: (for homework students read the UNICEF web site about children)

"Child soldiers are obedience. They are easier to manage than adults. That is not new thing which use child soldiers. Adults draft into the army more and more children. Children were forced to become soldiers. Girls soldiers often become prostitution. The child who was killed in Liberia is maybe seven years.

Children were taken unreasonable. Why there is not human dignity? Why so battle? Adults must consider by large scale. People with force must not menace the weak. We have rights to live which are safety, sanitary, healthy and free. I was surprised the facts that there are adults who don't undetsand what do he does. Why they don't consider so "If I was a child." I think that children need education and adults need education, too. Human need ability to read and write but human more need ethics." (female, 1st-year student)

Protest Music:

"These topics were difficult for me, but it was a good time to think about Iraq War, because I was not interesting in it, but in the class I should think about my country and what happen in the world. I enjoyed the class." (female, 4th-year student)

"Every week you made nice handout. It's interesting. Thank you. War topic is difficult, but we can't avoid talking about this, know about this, because we are "world people" who live in (on?) the earth!" [underline in the original] (female, 4th-year student)

### **Some final thoughts**

Empowering or Force-Feeding? Empowerment through a gentle initial feeding, but let students make up their own minds. There is an Neurolinguistic Programming technique often used in sales which consists of mirroring or matching the customer's body language, speaking style, etc., while giving a great description of how useful a product will be for the customer, but at the end mismatching in order to let the customer decide for herself. Similarly, the teacher who raises controversial social issues must have a good rapport with the students yet must allow and encourage them to hold their own opinions and make their own decisions. And, perhaps most important, the teacher must feel comfortable. With any exercise program, you don't start out with the heaviest weights or a 10 kilometer run. Push your own envelope a wee bit. Experiment and enjoy learning what works best for you as well as for the students.

Hansen writes about teaching to create a new world "in which persons can influence others for the good rather than for the bad; to help them learn rather than become more ignorant, to form aims and purposes themselves rather than leaving the task up to others, to develop the skill and talent to accomplish goals rather than being complacent and resigned" (p. 40).

Raising the issues can lead to questioning why things are the way they are.

Reflecting on why things are can lead to wondering how they got that way.

Thinking about how we want the world to be can lead to alternatives.

Considering alternatives can lead to seeing what small step each of us can take to make it so.

It's all in how you pull the tail.

And the younger woman on the beach who was watching the older woman? And she just could not understand why, when there were hundreds-or even thousands-of the starfish all along the beach, why someone would pick one up and throw it back in the water. She asked the woman, "Why are you doing this? It can't possibly make a difference."

And the older woman looked at her and, picking up another starfish, said, "To this one it makes a great deal of difference."

And that's what I hope to do.

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